

## WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL – vers. 1/2018

**Instructions: FORMAT:** Please follow this template to help streamline scoring. Italicized notes are intended to clarify the intent of each section and may be removed for the actual proposal. Proposals selected for Fish and Wildlife Commission endorsement will be included with the commission packet and will also be available for public review – please develop a professional proposal. Saving this file in an Adobe (pdf) format will reduce file size for emailing purposes. **SUBMISSION:** Submit as an electronic file both to the Habitat Bureau Chief and the Wildlife Division Office Manager. If the file is too large for email, please submit through the Montana File Transfer Service and send an email notification.

1. Applicant Name: Randy Arnold
2. Date: March 2018
3. Project Name: Cumming-Calf Creek WMA Addition Type of Acquisition: Fee
4. Size: 600 acres private ownership
5. Location: Region 2, Ravalli County, approximately 6 miles southeast of Corvallis adjacent to Calf Creek Wildlife Management Area.
6. Map(s): See Figures 1-3 below.
7. Project Need (Application Overview – limit to 1,500 characters) – **up to 10 pts.**  
The Cumming property is composed of three parcels sandwiched between Calf Creek WMA, existing conservation easements (held by the Bitter Root Land Trust, or BRLT) and Charley's Gulch Block Management Area. This potential addition is an important opportunity to protect big game winter range, given its proximity to populated areas (Hamilton and Corvallis), potential value to developers (including an access easement), and documented use by large herds of elk. The property provides open, low-elevation, south-facing range/grassland slopes as well as forested sections important for big game security cover.  
As part of the WMA, this property would provide walk-in access for hunting and recreation in an area of the Bitterroot that offers little access to National Forest through private land (the Stock Farm, Mildenerberger properties, and Frost BMA make up the largest proportion of private land adjacent to national forest in this hunting district). It would be subject to closure December 1 – April 15. This property may also provide a second access point to the WMA (to be determined).  
The southernmost parcel was previously owned by Gates, which was proposed for an FWP conservation easement in 2017. Now, as part of the Cumming estate (which does have legal access), this property is in an even better strategic position to be considered as an addition to Calf Creek WMA.

8. Broad Terrestrial and Aquatic Habitat Criteria – **up to 10 pts.** (*List Tier I Community Types (SWAP 2015) that make up a significant portion of the property. Please provide an approximate percentage makeup of each Tier I Community Type relative to the entire property. Riparian and stream courses may be listed as a distance or by acreage.*) Scoring follows:
- Tier I Community types involving Intermountain Grassland, Riparian/Wetland, or Shrub Grassland receive up to 4 points each.
    - **Intermountain Grassland: Approximately 50%**
    - **Riparian Wetland: Contains approximately ¾ mile of Calf Creek (the creek), as well as approximately 2 miles of other ephemeral streams**
  - Tier I Community Types outside of these broad habitats receive up to 2 points each.
    - **Approximately 50% Montane Forest**
  - Cropland (*each 10% increment reduces the score by 2 pts, for example 30% of property in cropland would reduce the score by 2x30/10=6 pts; cropland areas that are intended to be restored to permanent cover do not reduce the overall score*).
    - **0 acres of cropland.**
9. Project Level Criteria (*submit short paragraph or bullet points for each bolded heading and provide associated figure(s) as appropriate*)

- a) **Habitat Values – up to 10 pts.** (*What makes the habitat on this property high value? For example: Are there valuable biological/ecological characteristics such as strategic seasonal habitat for game species or species of greatest conservation need (SWAP 2015)? Is there a unique plant community that exists as a remnant of its original distribution? Does the property comprise a mix of priority habitats or a unique intact expanse of habitat? Etc.*)

This area is prime winter range for both elk and mule deer. The area, including the Weber conservation easement and Calf Creek WMA, is highly utilized by a large elk herd (50-100 animals); in fact, the presence of elk was an important factor in the approval of the Weber easement through the Bitter Root Land Trust in 2017. Maintaining high-quality habitat in this area may help prevent game damage problems to crops and private property further west.

The sagebrush habitat appears to be intact and healthy, with no clearing for agriculture or grazing (the nearby Frost property has multiple agriculture sites and grazing pastures cleared of sagebrush). The forested portion of the property consists primarily of Ponderosa pine/Douglas fir which has not been logged or burned during ownership, and could be at risk of catastrophic wildfire or beetle infestation in the future. However, as part of Calf Creek WMA, this property would be an ideal candidate for forest treatments to improve forage conditions for wintering wildlife and reduce the risk of beetle

kill/wildfire, and would in fact provide access for such projects to the southern portion of the existing WMA which currently has none.

As is typical of most private land, no nongame wildlife surveys have been done on the property, though inferences can be made based on nearby observations in similar habitats (including Calf Creek WMA). Wildlife values of this focal area include nesting habitat for a variety of grassland bird species, important wintering habitat for raptors, including golden eagles, and wintering habitat for several alpine bird species that use low-elevation grasslands in winter (gray-crowned rosy-finch and American pipit). An ongoing golden eagle research project has documented wintering golden eagles from Alaska using the grasslands of the Bitterroot Valley. Montana Species of concern (SOC) that could benefit from conservation of grasslands and sagebrush habitats in the EBGFA include western skink, golden eagle, long-billed curlew, Preble's shrew, bobolink, and Brewer's sparrow. Potential species of concern (PSOC) that may benefit include Idaho pocket gopher, western spotted skunk, short-eared owl and common poorwill.

- b) **Threat Status: PICK ONE** *(and provide brief explanation).*
- **PROBABLE - 5 pts:** This is an area of the Bitterroot that is experiencing heavy exurban development. There is an existing access easement to the north parcels through the Weber property as well as unofficial access to the south parcel through the Frost property, culminating in relatively gently-sloping foothills ideal for ranchettes that have been built in similar areas in the Valley. The property offers spectacular views of the Bitterroot Mountains and is minutes away from both Hamilton and Corvallis.
- c) **Focal Priority – up to 10 pts.** *(Describe as follows: Does the project occur within a 2015 SWAP Regional Focus Area? (4 pts) Is this project part of an ongoing multi-partner initiative? (3 pts) Does the property comprise substantial grasslands within an FWP Grassland Initiative priority county? (3 pts) Is this project area identified as a priority in a species or multi-species conservation plan? (3 pts))* The grassland portion of the property falls within the East Bitterroot Grasslands Focal Area (EBGFA), which is identified as a Tier 2 priority landscape for conservation in Montana's State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP). This focal area consists of mostly contiguous native foothill grasslands on the east side of the Bitterroot Valley. In contrast, most of the lower-elevation grasslands in the Bitterroot Valley have been extensively converted to cropland, hay production, or rural subdivisions. The EBGFA is mostly in private ownership, and this habitat and its traditional agricultural uses are threatened by subdivision and development.
- d) **Geographic Effectiveness – up to 10 pts.** The three parcels proposed for acquisition are well situated between an existing conservation easement on the Weber property to the northwest, Calf Creek Wildlife Management Area to

the east, and Block Management properties to the west and south (see Figure 2). One unprotected parcel would remain on the western border, currently owned by the S&C Cattle Company, which is also for sale and may be proposed as a second acquisition pending the outcomes of this current proposal.

e) **Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation – up to 10 pts.**

Calf Creek Wildlife Management Area currently provides walk-in big game hunting until December 1. As part of the WMA, this property would be integrated into the existing management plan.

Part of Calf Creek opens April 15 to provide recreational access, with the remainder of the WMA (including the portions directly adjoining the Cumming parcels) opening May 15. The WMA is heavily used throughout the spring and summer particularly by horseback riders, antler-shed hunters, hikers, joggers, and cyclists. If this proposal is accepted, managers would carefully consider whether the new land would be included for access between April 15 and May 15.

As FWP would have legal access to the parcels through the Weber property (see 9f below), the opportunity may exist for the northern parcel to provide a second access point to the WMA, pending management/maintenance considerations and public comment. At this time, we not believe it is necessary.

f) **Management Considerations – 10 pts.** *(What are the initial and ongoing obligations and liabilities associated with this project? Less is better. For example – substantial monitoring needs? Tax and fee obligations, such as irrigation water fees? Infrastructure improvements for grazing management or other needs? Additional staffing and equipment needs? Juxtaposition to other Wildlife Division and FWP land interests? Weed issues?)*

The current asking price for the property is \$1.8 million, or \$3,000/acre. However, there are pending issues regarding legal access through the Weber property; in short, the Webers sold land to the Cumming family at a price that included the legal access, but the Webers required an access easement through Calf Creek WMA which was never established. Legal access through FWP may substantially affect the appraised value of the property. The current asking price assumes a 60-foot access easement (which would allow subdivision), and while FWP will likely grant legal access, it will most likely not be 60 feet. We believe this conflict needs to be resolved between the Weber and Cumming family with little to no involvement by FWP; however, the situation may make the Cumming family more open to negotiations on price.

Pending an agreement on price, we anticipate that additional sources of funding for procuring this property as an addition to Calf Creek WMA may come from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association, and others. The Bitter Root Land Trust has offered to assist the local biologist with identifying and procuring additional grants.

At this time, we are unaware of any other substantial tax/fee obligations. Fence maintenance and weed control will be incorporated into the existing WMA's maintenance work. We do not currently anticipate using this addition for livestock grazing. There is a very derelict cabin present in the southern parcel (see Photo 1 below) which can be easily removed if necessary. As mentioned previously, managers will need to determine if any of the added land would be included in the portion of the WMA which opens early (April 15) for recreational use.

Figure 1. Wide view of property displaying proximity to towns of Hamilton and Corvallis. The yellow polygon is the Cumming property and the blue polygon is Calf Creek WMA.

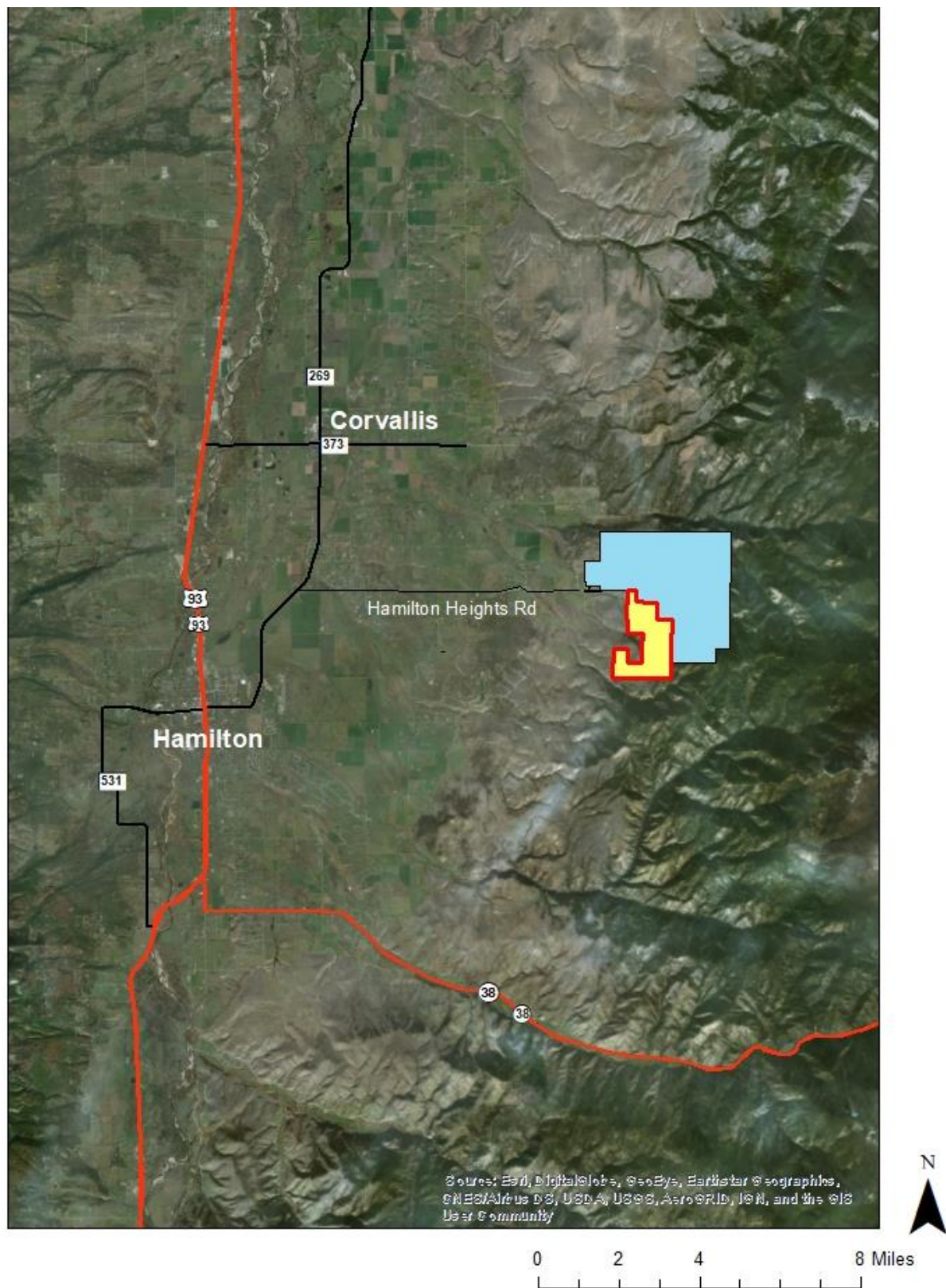




Figure 2. Cumming property (red polygon) and prominent land ownership in the vicinity.

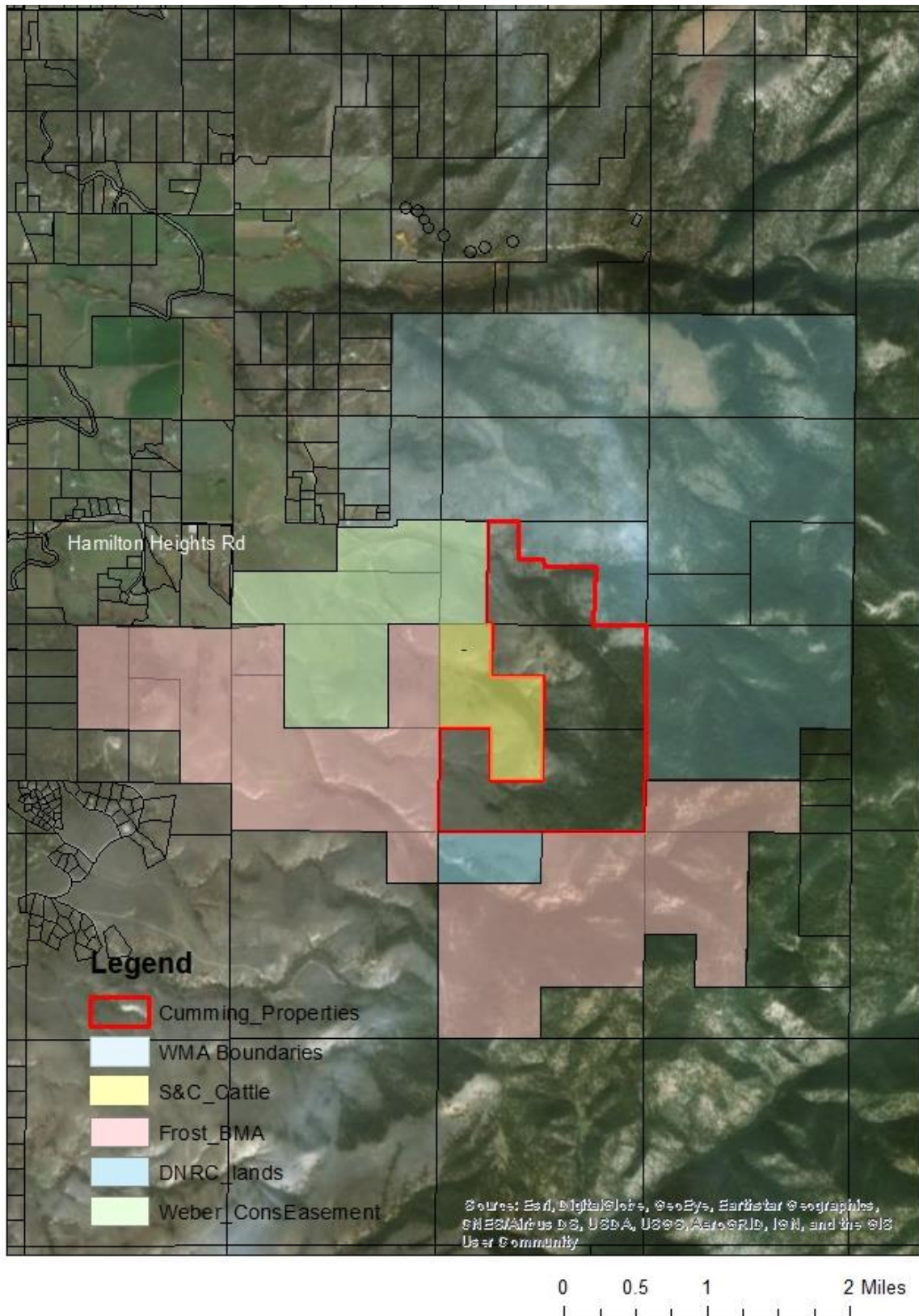


Figure 3. Close-up of Cumming property showing land cover.

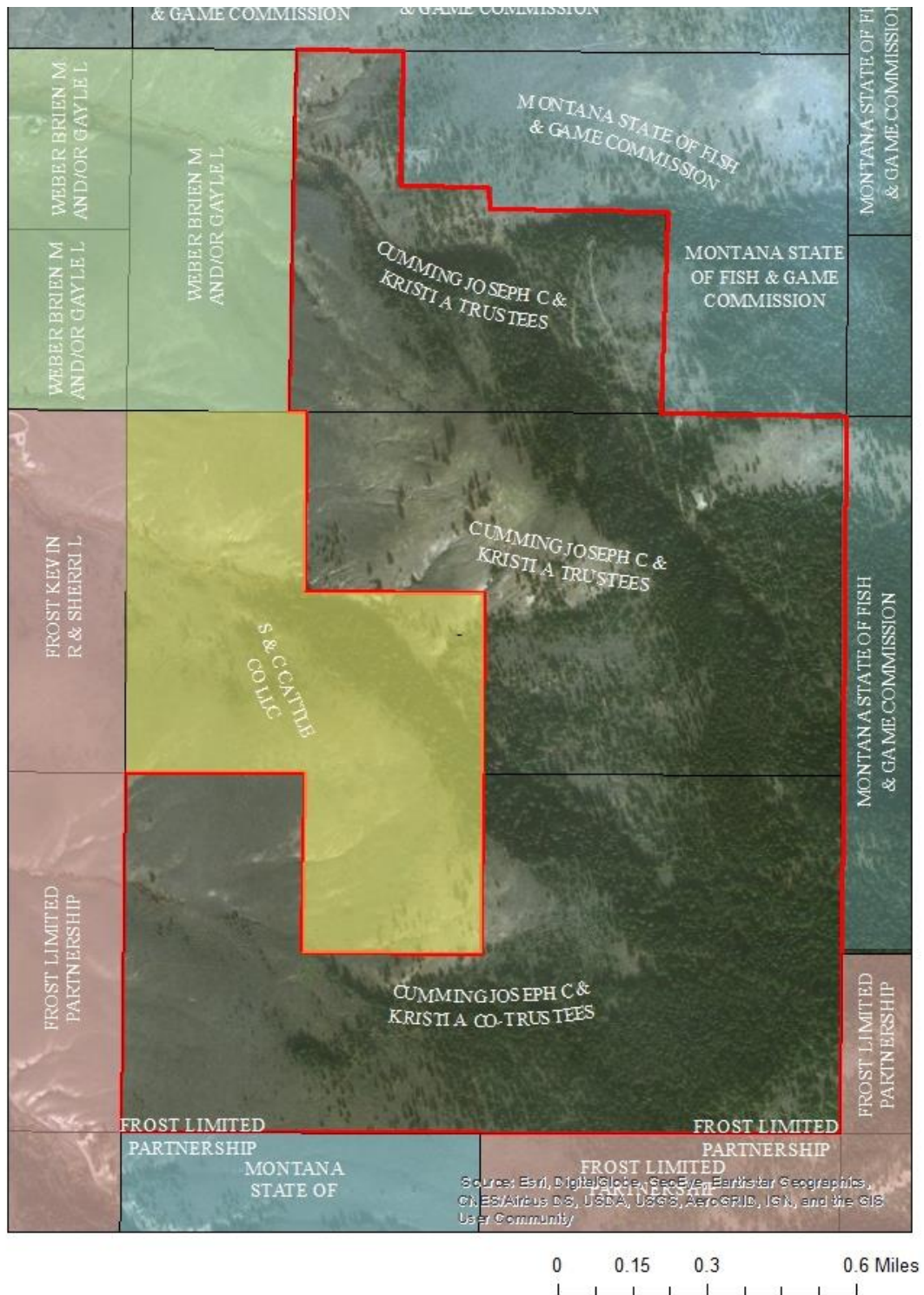






Photo 1. Looking west from southern parcel of the Cumming property. Note the excellent viewshed, poor condition of the road and the dilapidated cabin on the property.



Photo 2. Looking east from same location as Photo 1, onto forested portion of property.



Photo 3. Sagebrush habitat on Cumming property (looking east). Cabin just visible in background.